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**AN ANALYSIS OF MSFC PUBLIC AFFAIRS TELEVISION AND
TARGET AUDIENCES WITH SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE
GROWTH AND DIRECTIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

Because of profound changes in government and the space program, this may be an ideal time to evaluate MSFC's Public Affairs television efforts. The changes are continued downsizing of government programs; reduction in research and development; changes in the space program from periodic manned launches to a full-time presence in space with Space Station; and greater emphasis on science and communicating science information.

At the same time that NASA is undergoing change, the media and society are also undergoing substantial upheaval. Twenty-five years ago, the three main over-the-air television networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) had a 93 share of the television audience. We now have four popular over-the-air networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox) who maintain a 52 percent share of the television audience. Technological development, competition, and changing consumer tastes have created specialized media and audiences. This media fragmentation is part of a normal maturation cycle of use or adoption. While phases in the cycle vary in length due to many factors, the cycle has been consistent and reflects patterns of adoption. The cycle is: (1) Elite Media usage, (2) Popular or Mass Media usage, and (3) Specialized Media usage.

Another factor that affects the media development and adoption cycle is the creation of new and competing mass and personal mediums. While television remains the dominant and most popular mass medium, it is declining and we see (via cable television) specialized networks catering to small audience segments. Because of changing technology and consumer behavior, we may not see a dominant mass media like television again.

NASA Television & Specialized Audiences

The fact that the mass media is becoming smaller, less dominant and more specialized, will have an affect on how institutional public relations or government public affairs accomplishes its mission.

Network news focuses on popular news themes to increase audiences and advertising revenues. Because the networks have downsized, they are unable to cover as many stories as they used to and this translates into fewer national or regional news stories being fed to network affiliates in news feeds. To fill this void, local television stations have formed co-operatives or regional news networks and specialized program production firms create and send to affiliates stories of regional or specialized interest. Local news organizations are broadening and redefining what is considered a local story and they actively seek out national news events which have local angles or ties to their communities. Network news coverage of NASA missions has declined in this transition because NASA is no longer considered a "must cover" story by national and international media. Continuing successes have made NASA launches routine events and Marcia Dunn of the AP says the general population has become less interested in space and NASA missions.

As special interest television/cable networks develop, their programming and audiences tend to divide into three broad categories. They are: (1) Tabloid Media/Audiences, (2) Popular Media/Audiences, and (3) Specialized Media/Audiences.

The important distinction for this report is between Popular and Elite media and their audiences, and news programs targeted to these audiences. Popular news organizations are best defined by the general news products of ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN1 and most local television stations. The audience is large and defined by average socio-economic demographics. Elite television news programs tend to contain longer, in-depth stories that focus on issues, or important societal themes, such as environment, government spending,

race and the economy. Elite television does not ignore event coverage but hard news does not dominate news programs.

Most Popular news programs contains many short, simplistic stories with strong visual appeals. It is not uncommon to see highly visual stories of dubious news value replace more important news events with weak or no visuals. Gatekeepers in the Popular media feel that their audiences are not interested in science news unless the story is able to highlight direct and obvious benefits. In many instances, science becomes part of a larger story that capitalizes on more popular themes. Popular news programs concentrate on event coverage (crimes, fires and accidents) and themes immediately relevant to their audiences. These themes are health, heart, pocketbook and human interest.

Elite (specialized) news programs are usually found only on Elite television/cable networks such as Public Television, CNBC, or CNN2. While not specifically news programs, the Elite television/cable networks produce and carry programs that have a news or science base. Elite television viewers can best be described as "upscale." Their demographics reflect higher incomes and educational levels, political involvement, and selectivity in media consumption. Elite media consumers tend to be political and business forces in their communities and they are politically active people who try to affect political decisions. One final, and very important point is that the demographics of Elite television users are very similar to the demographics of that small population segment termed "science literate" who seek out and understand science news. (Miller & Prewitt, 1979; Miller, 1982, 1994; Warren Burkett, 1986) Estimates regarding the size of the "science literate" audience ranges from 6-18 percent of media consumers. Broadcasters estimate that no more than 10-20 percent of their audience is interested in science news.

Conclusions

Separate communication and outreach programs should be developed for gatekeepers in the Popular and Elite media which will capitalize on the demographics and interests of these diverse audiences.

The coordination and focus of MSFC television efforts would benefit from the hiring of a television content specialist to oversee the program.

NASA Public Affairs should start positioning itself to deliver consumer and high-quality, broadcast video via Internet through computers and modem connections.

Elite Media/Audiences

This is a highly desirable audience to reach because members of this audience are active politically and will try to affect political decisions. The number of gatekeepers of science or space related program content in the Elite media is rather small and individuals can be identified easily. Personal relationships should be established with these gatekeepers.

Information sent to Elite gatekeepers should be personalized and targeted.

An outreach program should be established and small groups of Elite gatekeepers should be invited to MSFC for carefully organized tour and briefings. Tours should be scheduled to coincide with major rocket tests or neutral buoyancy simulations. During the tour, individuals might be allowed to experience some of the same training or educational experiences that astronauts or missions specialists experience.

Popular Media/Audiences

There are many Popular media outlets and MSFC Public Affairs should continue to provide news releases and television products to these media. Additional efforts should be made to seek out and cater to specialized areas of interest in the Popular media.

MSFC should try to get television stations in the Southeast United States to redefine "local" to include MSFC. This could be done by using telephone, Fax or e-mail to notify gatekeepers that specific NASA events or themes might have interest in their markets.

Television gatekeepers should be identified and efforts should be made to create a personal relationships that might stimulate a greater interest in events at NASA. A modest outreach program similar to the one proposed for Elite gatekeepers might prove useful in creating relationships with stations in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia and Tennessee. An opportunity to visit NASA, go on tours and briefings and report "live" via MSFC facilities could help establish interest in NASA and reinforce the idea that MSFC is a local or regional news story.

Recommendations - Specific

Marshall Space Flight Center Public Affairs is responsible for five television efforts. These efforts can be categorized as Event News (Mission Coverage), and Thematic News. Mission Coverage is composed of Mission Briefings, Mission Updates and Live Mission Coverage programs. Thematic news refers to the Video File and Live Shot programs. Event, or hard news, will draw national and international media attention. Thematic, or softer news, tends to be less dramatic and less interesting to a national or international audience but it can be of interest to local or regional specialized media.

Event News (Mission Coverage) Recommendations

For the short term or until the international Space Station is operational, few substantial changes should be made in Mission Coverage. These efforts seem well conceived and targeted for their intended audiences who are the Elite and Popular science journalists who cover the space program. These gatekeepers are not as attentive to Live Mission Coverage as they used to be, but they still rely on Live Mission Coverage when something of interest occurs. While Mission Coverage activities are designed to keep media gatekeepers current on mission events, one element, the Live Shot program, is designed for Popular and Elite television viewers. The Live Shot program has great potential to communicate both mission and thematic news. The success of the Live Shot program during missions capitalizes on the desire of local stations to localize and participate in on-going national or international news which results in prestige for the station and news organization.

In the long-term, once the international Space Station is operational, NASA will not be able to maintain daily Mission Briefings and Mission Updates and indefinite, full-time Live Mission Coverage. Once initial interest in Space Station starts to wane, NASA television should go to a weekly schedule of Mission Updates and Mission Briefings. Live Mission Coverage should be available only during dockings or unusual scientific events.

The main problem observed with Mission Coverage television activities was the lack of good or illustrative video/graphics for many scientific experiments. Animation in Mission Updates, Mission Briefings and Live Mission Coverage would improve comprehension and audience attention. Studies have shown that news releases with illustrative graphics or visuals receive substantially greater usage and space in newspapers, and it can be assumed that animation would have a similar benefit with television.

Thematic News Recommendations

The video shot for Video Files, and other television efforts, is technically good but visually dull and does not contain the "visual elements" that would immediately gain the attention of news assignment editors or producers. Too many Video Files contain video of incomprehensible lab experiments, people working on computers or interviews shot in an office far from the news event. Another problem is that an unacceptable number of Video File interviews must be reshot because the interviewee gave long and complex answers.

Recommendations:

A greater use of animation would improve the visual element of Video File stories, and it is assumed, lead to increased use.

Where appropriate, human interest elements should be highlighted to provide a hook upon which MSFC science can be conveyed.

When possible, interviews should be shot "in the field" where there is a natural dynamic that enhances the interview.

The interviewer should spend more time "coaching" the interviewee about the types and length of answers that will be needed before the interview starts. If long, complex answers are given, the interviewer must press for usable, comprehensible answers that will serve the needs of the media.

Many assignment editors and news producers do not pay sufficient attention to NASA press releases, Video Advisories and Video Files. The perception is that NASA press releases and related Video File stories are national in scope and would not fit into a local newscast.

Recommendations:

Try to localize and target the content or news angle of press releases, Video Advisories and Video Files in the same manner that Live Shots are targeted and marketed. Where possible and appropriate, individualized Faxes or e-mail messages outlining the local or specialized news angle should precede Video Files.

There seems to be confusion about the relationship, or lack of relationship, between news releases and Video File material. Press releases related to Video Files may not go out at the same time as the Video File.

Recommendations:

Video Files and news releases should be numbered or coded so it is obvious that they are related. Video File slates should also contain directions on where and how to obtain related news releases off the Internet and its code number.

A number of television stations do not have the equipment, ability or desire to reposition satellite dishes to monitor NASA Television.

Recommendations:

Start preparing to move Video File to a computer/digital base so that stations and individuals will be able to download video information via computer through cable, T1 telephone lines or inexpensive home satellite systems. NBC NewsChannel and several weather services are currently delivering video, graphics and animation to affiliates through computer and telephone or fiber links. As technology and compression modules improve, the move to computer/Internet delivery of video will accelerate.

The Live Shot program is targeted and sold to various markets based on specialized content or local angles. Unlike the Video File program, the impact of the Live Shot program is easy to evaluate because stations sign up for the service and it is easy to determine market size and station position. The Live Shot program has great potential to deliver thematic news with a local angle or specialized content. As was noted, during the Mission Coverage segment, the Live Shot program is productive and focused on mission

events. During other times, however, the program does not appear to be as well focused or productive. Much of the video b'roll and studio interviews suffer from the same problems outlined in the Video File section. Video b'roll and studio interviews are dull and do not capitalize interesting locales at MSFC which are available through a fiber optic network.

Recommendations:

Public Affairs contractors who maintain beats should relay information about story ideas and contacts to the Live Shot Coordinator.

An annual plan for Live Shots should be developed. The plan should be proactive rather than reactive regarding planned events, missions, MSFC conferences and ongoing scientific programs.

Several visual locations should be established for Live Shot interviews.

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Interviews and Additional Work

- Interviews with Public Affairs Officers (3)
- Interviews with assignment editors/producers (19)
- Interviews with NBC NewsChannel managers (3)
- Interviews with Global Hydrology and Climate Center personnel (2)
- Viewed Mission Updates productions (5)
- Viewed Mission Briefings (4)
- Viewed Video Files (23)
- Viewed Video File productions (3)
- Developed Data Base of Broadcast/Cable Television News Program Producers

